

# Journal of the Senate

## ONE HUNDRED THIRD GENERAL ASSEMBLY

### OF THE

### STATE OF MISSOURI

### FIRST REGULAR SESSION

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**FIRST DAY - WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 8, 2025**

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#### Opening Address

Senator Cindy O’Laughlin, President Pro Tem

First Regular Session, 103rd General Assembly

January 8, 2025

Good afternoon, Senators, distinguished guests, and fellow Missourians.

Thank you for the trust you’ve placed in me by electing me as President Pro Tem of the Missouri Senate. It is an honor to serve in this role, and I am humbled by your confidence in my ability to lead this chamber through the challenges and opportunities ahead.

I want to take a minute and thank my husband, Russell, for being here today. He has exercised extraordinary patience with me and has been very supportive of me through the ups and downs during my years in the Missouri Senate. Thank you.

Like many of my most passionate supporters and sharpest critics, my political career didn’t begin in the Capitol—it began as an activist. As a small business owner, I experienced firsthand the frustrating disconnect between government policies and the realities faced by families and workers in communities across our state. I believed that having a business owner’s perspective could bring much-needed common sense to the decision-making process. When a Senate seat opened, I initially tried to encourage other business owners to step up, but no one was willing to take on the challenge. So, I decided to step forward myself. Six years later, I am honored to stand before you as your leader and humbled by this journey. We have much to accomplish and with hard work and God’s grace I believe we can make a difference for the people of Missouri.

Throughout my time in public service, I've held firm in my belief about what truly makes Missouri great. Our greatness is rooted in the strength of responsible families who work hard, educate their children, and build resilience and faith. It is grounded in the character and wisdom of our young people—qualities that guide them to make sound decisions, achieve success, and lay the foundation for their own families. Dedicated parents, through their tireless efforts, instill in their children the determination to reach for their goals. This has always been the hallmark of societies that thrive.

Our policies must reflect these values. We must support strong, healthy families, expand access to quality education, ensure safe neighborhoods, and set high expectations for the next generation. This is the foundation for success and prosperity. Yet, we have too often allowed ourselves to be distracted from this path.

While I am confident in what makes our state great, I must also speak plainly about what does not. Our greatness does not come from Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives that prioritize superficial measures over merit and responsibility. Our greatness does not stem from policies that make abortion easy and accessible while devaluing the sanctity of life and undermining the sanctity of the family. Our greatness is not found in unchecked illegal immigration, which strains our resources and challenges our communities. Our greatness is not found in enabling destructive behaviors, whether it's gambling away a paycheck or the normalization of drug use. When we look at the trajectory of our state, it is clear that we are facing real challenges. But I believe that by returning to our core values and principles, we can chart a better course forward.

I stand before you today as the first woman to ever be elected President Pro Tem of the Missouri Senate. And, as a woman, I have seen firsthand how the role of the family has been transformed and, sadly, too often trivialized. Mothers have been undervalued, fathers have been dismissed, and the institution of marriage has been diminished. These shifts have left deep and lasting challenges for families across our state. Single-parent households and absent fathers create barriers that can feel insurmountable for those trying to navigate the demands of parenthood.

Missouri cannot and should not seek to replace the family, but we must recognize its vital importance. We must remind the next generation of mothers and fathers that they are special, that their roles matter, and that their contributions are indispensable. For families struggling to put food on the table, find steady work, or access quality education, we must ensure they have local solutions to lift them up and meet their needs where they are. By investing in families, we are investing in the future of our state.

If you take a hard look at our child welfare system, you will see a system that is failing—failing to meet families where they are, failing to understand their struggles, and failing to provide meaningful assistance in their time of need. Too often, instead of addressing the root causes of poverty and addiction, we criminalize them. The result? Children are seized from their families, almost guaranteeing additional trauma and harm.

This cannot continue. Our system must become more compassionate, more hands-on, more local, and more purposeful. Removing children into state custody cannot remain our default response to every crisis. Families in turmoil do not need to be raided; they need to be supported and strengthened with resources that address their challenges at the ground level.

At the same time, we must be resolute in protecting children from true harm. In cases of physical or sexual abuse, we must act swiftly and decisively to ensure their safety. These children deserve secure, loving homes—whether with foster families, relatives, or other kinship support. When biological parents refuse to take the steps necessary to provide a safe environment, we must stop subjecting innocent children to cycles of harm.

Children in crisis deserve more than delayed action and endless uncertainty. They deserve a clear and stable path to safety, permanency, and hope for a better future. Our responsibility is not just to respond—it is to act with purpose and urgency, ensuring the best outcomes for the most vulnerable among us.

Too many of Missouri's children are being left behind, not because they lack potential, but because we have failed to give them the tools to succeed. A quality education should be the cornerstone of every child's future, yet in some of our school districts, large and small, basic skills like reading and math are neither taught effectively nor prioritized. Despite investing millions of additional dollars in literacy training and being four years past the COVID pandemic, only 41 percent of our students are reading at grade level or above. These failures deprive children of the ability to build the foundation they need for a lifetime of learning and opportunity.

Every child can learn, and every child must be taught to read. Without this skill, their futures are stolen before they even begin. This failure is not the fault of one group alone—it is a collective failure. From the state to school boards, from educators to parents, every stakeholder must do better. It is time to refocus our efforts on results that matter: Can a child read by third grade? Can they understand and analyze what they read by eighth grade? Are they prepared by high school graduation to pursue a trade, higher education, or a career of their choosing? These are the benchmarks that define success, and by these measures, we are failing far too many children in Missouri. This cannot continue.

We must also recognize that education and health are deeply intertwined. A child who is not well nourished cannot focus, learn, or thrive. Our policies should encourage environments that support physical and mental well-being, beginning with the basics of proper nutrition and active lifestyles. Far too many children are consuming diets that hinder their ability to concentrate and succeed in school. By promoting healthier choices and fostering habits that prioritize well-being, we not only improve their ability to learn but also lay the groundwork for a lifetime of success. These are investments in their futures and the future of Missouri.

But even with the best education and proper nutrition, our children and families cannot thrive without safety. Yet across Missouri, from Joplin to St. Louis City, crime has become a serious problem, robbing families of the peace and security they deserve. Fentanyl trafficking, break-ins, and violent crime have reached unacceptable levels. Missouri's violent crime rate is now 28% higher than the national average. We must act decisively to confront these challenges.

We must stand firmly with law enforcement as they work to reclaim our streets and hold accountable those who threaten our communities. The reality is that most crimes are committed by a small number of repeat offenders. We can no longer tolerate a system that fails to deliver justice—one that releases dangerous individuals back onto our streets to reoffend. Swift consequences are essential to restoring safety and ensuring justice for victims.

When families and communities are strong, when children are well-nourished and well-educated, and when our streets are safe, Missouri thrives. These are not lofty ideals—they are achievable goals. But reaching them will require determination, focus, and the courage to make the hard choices necessary for our future.

For those of you who know me, you know I've spent my life working in male-dominated industries. From trucking to ready-mix concrete, and as the mother of four sons, I've learned how to make tough decisions and stand firm against ideas that don't hold up under scrutiny. These experiences have taught me the value of building strong foundations—both in business and in life. In state government, just as in concrete, the foundation matters. The people of Missouri deserve results that are real, measurable, and, above all, accountable.

Government at every level must be transparent. Taxpayers have a right to know how their money is being spent

and to trust that every dollar supports the priorities that matter most: building better roads, ensuring safe streets, strengthening families, expanding quality education options, and fostering an environment where businesses can create good-paying jobs. Every decision we make should reflect the values of the people we serve and deliver results that stand the test of time—just like the strongest foundation.

It is time to set clear standards and demand accountability. We owe it to the people of Missouri to ensure their hard-earned tax dollars are not wasted on political agendas but invested in ways that strengthen our communities and deliver results that are as solid as the values we represent.

I am excited for the work ahead. If you share my belief that Missouri can do better, that we can prioritize spending more effectively, and that we can demand greater accountability from our government at all levels, then I look forward to working with you to lay a foundation for success and deliver the results Missourians deserve.

To my colleagues, I offer this invitation: let us rise to the responsibility we have been entrusted with. Leadership requires collaboration, thoughtful debate, and decisions rooted in sound policy. It is not always an easy path, and there will always be critics. But I have confidence in each of you, in your ideas, and in your commitment to making Missouri a great place to live, work, build a business, and raise a family. Together, we can build something lasting.

Thank you for your trust in me and for giving me the honor of serving as your leader. I am humbled by your confidence and will work every day to be worthy of it. May God bless us with wisdom and may He also bless the great state of Missouri.